

even the terms and structures of protest or rebellion. The inescapability of ideology resided precisely in its epistemological constraints, since the subject structures it fostered conditioned our perception and understanding of the world. The escape from the grip of ideology that Althusser envisioned consisted in developing "scientific" analyses of dominant social languages and of their strategies of subject construction. By "scientific" Althusser meant a discourse that would bypass subjectivity, both as a valid standpoint for analysis and as its proposed aim—as in the creation of "more authentic subjectivities." Such critical discourse could help to forge linguistic constructs and social positions that would not posit a subject, a complicit ideological structure immediately entailing subjection (a recurrent pun in Althusser's work). From this perspective, the questioning of received subjective structures and social languages had the political value of questioning existing power structures as well.

As a pervasive and alluring ideological apparatus, the popular cinema had a considerable share in producing and perpetuating ideological subject positions. Through its formal idiom (consisting in centered framing, maximal intelligibility, and clear-cut narrative sequence); identification with individualized character figures; and the physical layout of the screening situation, which placed the spectator as a privileged, phenomenological (all-seeing, centered) eye (I, in a well-worn *Screen* pun), the cinema fostered (through interpellation) a fully ideological subject. From *Screen's* perspective, any film practice that would displace these traits of the cinematic apparatus was endowed with revolutionary potential, as it obstructed the promotion of ideological subjective positions.

Peter Wollen was the writer associated with *Screen* who most systematically applied the principles of Althusserian

ideological analysis to theorizing the avant-garde. In such pieces as "The Two Avant-Gardes," he sought to politicize an area of cultural production that had received, for the most part, largely idealistic appraisals. Opposing romantic characterizations like Sitney's, Wollen proposed to re-read film modernism and avant-gardism as a semiotic inquiry into filmic codes of representation, an inquiry that had ultimately political effects. This recasting of avant-garde formal inquiry as a means of political intervention helped to close the gap between what Wollen considered the "two avant-gardes": a formalist one, identified with abstract cinema and, in the seventies, with the different Co-Op movements; and a more representational, political avant-garde, practiced, for example, from Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov to Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Marie Straub. Wollen's argument also posited an implicit analogy between avant-garde or modernist practice and *Screen* criticism, both of which aimed to deconstruct what they postulated as dominant representational codes and pleasures, and to imagine non-repressive (non-ideological, non-subject-based) alternatives.¹³

While avoiding the extreme idealism of Sitney's model, *Screen's* conception of the avant-garde had in common with it its regarding the text as privileged object of inquiry; political significations and tropes of decentering and dissolution were extracted from the stable ground of the text's formal traits, not from the far more volatile dynamics of its circulation. At the bottom of such reduction lay the decision, unwarranted by Althusser's formulations, that ideology was more powerfully operative in texts than in the web of practices which accrue around them. This seemed particularly problematic when applied to one of *Screen's* main objects of study: the popular cinema. In Hollywood films, for example, marketing devices, stars' personae, au-

diences' exposure to popular genres, and knowledge of inside gossip strongly influence a film's reception, and therefore its ideological effect. With regard to alternative cinemas, the presumably radical effect of non-illusionistic and subject-decentering modes of representation was also context-specific, as demonstrated *de facto* by the development, during the 1980s, of MTV and of certain advertisement strategies which mobilized modernist textual forms in contexts that were far from politically revolutionary. Ironically, *Screen* criticism itself purveyed an example of the power of contextual determinants, since it was the conceptual frame combining sophisticated formal analysis and a leftist political agenda that permitted critics to reactivate the classical cinema as an ideological apparatus, symptomatic of epistemological givens and specific subject constructions and positionings.

While the importance of *Screen* theorists' efforts in endowing modernist formal deviations with a political weight should be kept in mind, I think their text-centered characterizations ought to be complemented with a closer attention to contextual variation and to the *social performance* of avant-garde texts—that is, their *uses* and *effects*, the ways in which they interacted with other texts, were activated by audiences, or functioned (in Fredric Jameson's phrase) as "socially symbolic acts," encoding specific cultural or ideological conflicts. The exploration of these factors with regard to the underground will be the purpose of the present study. In this respect, my work is closer to the general orientation and methodology of two recent and important texts: Lauren Rabinovitz's *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-1971* and David E. James's *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the 1960s*.¹⁴ Both react to the

apolitical romanticism of Sitney, on the one hand, and to the formalist political modernism of *Screen*, on the other, while characterizing avant-garde cinema as an evolving practice in constant negotiation with its social and cultural environments. My own work differs from theirs in that I concentrate on the early 1960s underground, while James and Rabinovitz have broader temporal and generic scopes, and, further, in my attempt to read the underground as the intersection of gay subcultural identities, mass culture, and 1960s avant-gardism.

In order to place the 1960s underground cinema in proper context, chapter 1 maps theoretically and historically the avant-garde's distinctive interaction with mass culture. Chapter 2 characterizes the New York underground as a specific cultural formation. It examines the movement's internal organization, modes of production, showcases, audiences, channels of dissemination, and ideology, stressing an internal split in the movement between a withdrawn, modernist aesthetic, and an avant-gardist one of engagement with mass culture. Chapter 3 explores the underground within the context of the emergent postmodernism reflected in the writings of Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler, and Tom Wolfe, and in subcultural popular forms such as comics, film cults, and the camp and gay activation of mainstream texts. I will argue that, in contrast with the apolitical "pop" or "new sensibility" of Wolfe or Sontag, the rejection of modernism and the fascination with mass cultural forms on the part of a sector of the underground must be viewed as a form of subcultural activism linked to the staging of gay identities.

The last three chapters explore how the films of Anger, Smith, and Warhol articulate different relations between avant-garde textuality and mass cultural icons and myths.

The order in which I treat these authors is chronological. I deal with Anger first (chapter 4) because, although he belongs in the same age group as Warhol and Smith, he started making movies in the late 1940s, in the mode of what I will define later as a "gay modernist" aesthetic, and practically stopped producing movies altogether after 1972, when his unfinished *Lucifer Rising* premiered. Anger's oeuvre exemplifies a shift from postwar modernism to early 1960s postmodernism, and shows an ambivalence toward mass culture resulting from the combination of these two contradictory influences. Jack Smith started making films in the late 1950s. His work involves a fascination with drag, Hollywood glamour, and old-fashioned kitsch, together with a rigorous attempt to maintain the critical thrust of alternative culture and to avoid commodification. Warhol comes last because his career extends well into the 1970s and 1980s, when he refashioned himself as a society artist, seemingly questioning his previous underground career. I will show how his underground films transposed into the avant-garde the image-making strategies of fashion and advertisement, blurring, in the process, the distinctions between mainstream and marginal art.

Avant-Garde and Mass Culture: Mapping the Dialectic

One

Clement Greenberg's article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," written in 1939, is often the starting point in discussions of the avant-garde.¹ This famous essay is in many ways symptomatic of late 1930s cultural criticism, especially in its valuation of avant-garde as "authentic" culture in sharp opposition to mass culture or kitsch.² Authors such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse in Germany, and Meyer Schapiro and Clement Greenberg in the United States, all of whom wrote about mass culture, modernism, and avant-garde at this time, postulated high modernist and avant-garde aesthetics as antidotes to the spurious and manipulative character shown by mass culture in both democratic and totalitarian regimes.³

From this array of influential authors, I choose to start my study with a reevaluation of Greenberg's seminal piece for several reasons. Written and published in the late 1930s, Greenberg's article stands at the end of the most spectacular period of the historical avant-garde and modernism.⁴ By the late 1930s, modern artistic tendencies had been fully assimilated into bourgeois culture and were under severe attack from both right- and left-wing political factions. Formal experimentation was being criticized by the left as escapist and isolated from real-life problems at a time when the joint pressure of political conservatism and fascism led left-wing artists and intellectuals throughout Europe to demand an aesthetics of immediate impact and intelligibility that could be used directly in political and social struggle.⁵ This tendency was represented in France, for example, by the *Association des artistes et écrivains révolutionnaires* (ADAER), an artistic front seeking to engage art in radical political struggle. With a majority of Communist Party members in its ranks, the ADAER endorsed socialist realism, launched in 1930 by the Second International Congress of Revolutionary Writers, and rejected the avant-gardism of the surrealists, some of whom were members of the organization. In Germany similar debates pitted Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, and Bertolt Brecht, defenders of aesthetic innovation and anti-traditionalism, against George Lukács, one of the leading proponents of the new Soviet realism.⁶

Modern art, as is well known, was not more favorably viewed at this time by the political right. In fascist Germany, artistic movements from Expressionism to *Neue Sachlichkeit* were the object of an exhibition—"Degenerate Art"—where they were exposed as decadent, pathological, and demeaning to the "Aryan race." In France, the right often

sought to boycott and prosecute radical artistic expressions, as was the case with Louis Aragon's poem "Front Rouge" and Luis Buñuel's film *L'Age d'or*, both of which appeared in 1930. The reevaluation of avant-garde culture (i.e., modern art, for Greenberg), often modulating into a defense or apology, is therefore a common topic in the cultural criticism of the period. Greenberg, like other of his contemporaries mentioned above, is evaluating both modernism and the avant-garde at a moment when they were besieged by opposite political tendencies. His article reflects the tensions of the moment, and one detects a certain urgency in his defense of experimental art as the only remaining "authentic culture": "Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened."⁷

Another reason to start my discussion with Greenberg's piece lies in his methodology, which seeks to relate the "aesthetic experience as met by the specific—not generalized—individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place."⁸ Linking aesthetic experience to social and historical contexts permits Greenberg to theorize avant-garde *and* kitsch as negotiating a similar set of conflicts in the culture. As the title of his article suggests, kitsch is the inseparable double of the avant-garde: "Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rearguard."⁹ Hence, despite Greenberg's obvious preference for the avant-garde, he implies the extent to which neither artistic culture can be discussed without reference to the other.¹⁰ This awareness is also the basis of the present chapter, which will recast Greenberg's categorization of these two artistic cultures. In the process it will be shown that, despite the tendency to view avant-garde and kitsch separately, they have been interrelated historically

(because of their simultaneous emergence) and structurally (by virtue of their somewhat parallel social vocation). This being the case, there is much to be gained in the understanding of the avant-garde by reevaluating its relations to mass culture.

Greenberg's article is one of the most influential statements on avant-garde culture to be issued in the United States. It was first published in *Partisan Review*, which was perhaps the major vehicle for left (more specifically, Trotskyist) cultural criticism in America during the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹ *Partisan Review* contributed during its early years to disseminating avant-garde European culture in America, a function that had been carried out in the 1920s by journals such as *The Dial*, Matthew Josephson's *Broom*, and Margaret Anderson's *Little Review*, and would be continued during the 1940s by Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's *View*.¹² Unlike these publications, however, *Partisan Review* tended to foreground the political aspects of modernism and avant-gardism, as can be discerned in Greenberg's piece and in some of his later writing. Greenberg's views must then be framed within the New York-based artistic and intellectual community, which had since the early 1910s been extremely receptive to the European avant-garde.¹³ It is important to keep in mind the existence of this tradition in New York, since, as we shall see in later chapters, it was a determining cultural background for successive generations of avant-garde artists, writers, and filmmakers.

By situating Greenberg's text in these contexts, I am trying to show its liminal position in the history of the avant-garde: it is poised between the European and the American avant-gardes; between the historical avant-garde and the so-called neo-avant-gardes of the fifties and sixties;

between the heroic days of the European bohemia and what Greenberg understood as the present cultural trivialization brought about by kitsch; and between the Moscow trials and the dissolution of the Popular Front when many left-wing American intellectuals had become disillusioned with Stalinism and the onset of the Cold War. Finally, the article summarizes roughly a century of artistic and historical developments and seeks evaluative criteria that would help us preserve, as he puts it, "whatever living culture we have right now." For all these reasons, Greenberg's piece seems an appropriate starting point for a study which tries to reformulate some of its most influential pronouncements in the context of the American avant-garde cinema of the sixties.

The Greenbergian Paradigm

Greenberg's arguments have been extremely influential, both as a widely accepted critical stance toward both avant-garde and mass culture, and subsequently as a major target of attacks from what we might call postmodern American cultural criticism.¹⁴ The latter type of criticism emerged in the early 1960s when a number of intellectuals began to question high modernist seriousness and elitism. Major representatives of this trend were Marshall McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, and Tom Wolfe.¹⁵ Their celebrations of a cultural logic later tagged postmodernism tended to reject (to borrow Sontag's coinage) Greenberg's "Jewish seriousness" in favor of a purportedly playful and democratic "homosexual aestheticism," to the extent that criticizing Greenberg's piece—implicitly or explicitly—has become a tired move in most contemporary cultural critique. Perhaps for this reason it seems worth reviewing Greenberg's position at the threshold of this study, for his rather categorical

(and context-specific) dismissal of mass culture has acted almost as a red flag for his opponents, obscuring other strengths in his arguments.

The "avant-garde" (read, modern art) is, in Greenberg's formulation, a symptom of social and cultural crisis. This crisis is motivated by the ideological relativism that permeated bourgeois culture toward the mid-nineteenth century, when "... our present bourgeois social order was shown to be, not an eternal, 'natural' condition of life, but simply the latest term in a succession of social orders."¹⁶ The "relativization" of bourgeois culture led to the emergence of alternative subcultures and ideologies that contradicted bourgeois ways of thinking and doing. Most important among these anti-bourgeois developments were social and political radicalism and avant-gardism.¹⁷ Greenberg described the avant-garde's breakup with the established bourgeois order as the emigration "from bourgeois society to Bohemia." This flight cut the avant-garde off from bourgeois audiences and public life and had the effect of throwing art into the realm of the "merely artistic," which for Greenberg is the formalist exploration of the medium and the rejection of content: "Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself." Imitation of external reality is replaced by "the study of imitation" understood, in its Aristotelian sense, as "the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves."¹⁸ If the basis of all art is mimesis, the avant-garde settles at the center of art by being "the imitation of imitation": imitation turned inward, withdrawn into its own self-referentiality. The result of this inward-turning is an exacerbation of formalism and a sort of art in exile from the values of audiences, that is, an art which seeks to remain

untainted by reigning mercantilism and instrumental rationality.

As the avant-garde moves away from its bourgeois audiences, kitsch, in turn, turns these audiences away from the demanding and hermetic art of the avant-garde. Hence, while political pressures threaten the existence of avant-garde culture from the outside, kitsch undermines it from the inside—that is, from the realm of cultural production itself. Kitsch is synonymous with one part of mass culture: the trivial, commodified products of what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno called “the culture industry” and Greenberg described as the “[p]opular commercial literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.”¹⁹ As cliché-ridden, predictable, predigested forms, these make for a culture of easy consumption and assimilation; they furnish the appearance of art with none of its intellectual demands.

I have just summarized what I want to call the “formalist argument” in Greenberg’s piece: the avant-garde is complex and demanding while kitsch is simplistic and non-demanding. (“Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.”)²⁰ But the formalist argument, like the rigid split between avant-garde and kitsch, has obscured another interesting criterion of value in Greenberg’s article—the closeness of cultural forms to the values of audiences. And by this criterion, modernism is seen by Greenberg as somewhat lacking. Modernism is bourgeois art without the bourgeoisie, since its major artists propound bourgeois ideals at a time when these have been rendered empty by an oppressive state and by the culture of consumption. Glossing Greenberg,

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T. J. Clark describes this predicament as follows: "They [avant-garde artistic values] are the repository, as it were, of forms of affect and intelligence that once inhered in a complex form of life but do so no longer; they are the concrete form of intensity and self-consciousness, the only one left and therefore the form to be preserved at all costs and somehow kept apart from the surrounding desolation."²² Hence while Greenberg defends modernism, he also points out that it is dangerously cut off from its social base, since the only remaining link between bourgeoisie and avant-garde is "an umbilical cord of gold" in the form of the patronage of cultivated bourgeois elites. Greenberg seems doubtful as to the validity of this link, as market relations, characterized by commodification and instrumentalization, cannot replace the former "organic" connections between the bourgeoisie and its artists that reigned when, according to him, art embodied the aspirations and ideals of the rising class; before, that is, this very class betrayed its own ideals.

Art's isolation from the public can be resolved by bridging the gap between art and the experiences, ambitions, and desires of its audiences. Such redefinition of the social place of art is a frequent topic in the critical writings of Leon Trotsky, Walter Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht, and, as we will see, it constitutes the driving force of what I will describe as the avant-garde in opposition to modernism. The existence of this alternative means that avant-garde culture is different in important ways from high modernism, a difference that Greenberg does not take into account and that will help us reevaluate the relations between avant-garde and kitsch in a more dialectical way. Intent on linking art and daily experience, the avant-garde does not share modernism's relentless hostility toward kitsch. On

the contrary, it tries to assimilate critically into its products the iconography, structures of feeling, and forms of practice emanating from mass culture as a means of integrating art into the lives of audiences.

This possible avenue, hinted at but not taken, in the avant-garde and kitsch discussion would soon completely disappear from Greenberg's writings, as he progressively reduced his ideas about the place of art in society to formal arguments. In "Towards a Newer Laocoon," published in *Partisan Review* one year after "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," he reelaborated the contents and general thesis of the latter piece while enhancing the development toward pure form as an autonomous artistic dynamic and eliding the contextual determinations of artistic and cultural developments.²² Non-specific summations such as "Forces stemming outside art play a much larger part than I have room to acknowledge" appear as gestures in this later essay, and because they are just that, they preclude more serious examination of what these forces might be, and how they might operate.²³ The article constitutes a concise yet trenchant rewriting of the painterly developments of the last two centuries in terms of the emergence of form as the main subject matter of painting. The drift of the piece is, to my eyes, hardly surprising, since its explicit thesis is to demonstrate the superiority of contemporary abstract expressionism over figurative art. In other words, the rewriting of the past is mediated through the need to justify the present, and this justification seems to demand a certain oblivion toward the social pressures incumbent on art.²⁴

Avant-Garde, Modernism, and the Institution of Art

If Greenberg progressively eliminated art's contextual determinations from his arguments, Peter Bürger's *Theory*

of the *Avant-Garde* (1974) emphasized them quite forcefully.²⁸ Fully inserted in the Marxist tradition of critical theory, Bürger's book approaches the avant-garde from the perspective of its cultural politics, which define in turn its rapport with bourgeois society. Some of Bürger's arguments are already prefigured in Greenberg's piece, but the two authors differ in their conclusions. While Greenberg conflates modernism and avant-garde, much of Bürger's work is taken up by the attempt to differentiate between the two, a difference which is politically marked, as it refers to how each artistic culture operates in bourgeois society.

Like Greenberg, Bürger regards the dominance of form over content as the principal trend in the development of modern art since Romanticism; however, he does not hypostatize such development as art's immanent goal. The increasing importance of form is for him a reflection of art's progressive independence from other realms of value, activity, and rationality. According to his analysis, throughout the eighteenth century, art gradually detached itself from its former patrons, the church and the court, and became closer to the values and aspirations of the rising bourgeoisie. As a result of this independence, art solidified into an institution with its own internal dynamics and sources of value, no longer subordinated to direct patronage, and increasingly reliant on the indirect one provided by the free circulation of works of art in an emergent art market. The aesthetic theories of Kant and Schiller, with their emphasis on the autonomy of aesthetic judgment, reflected the gradual detachment of art from the sphere of life, a development which Bürger dates around the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Aesthetic autonomy, however, is not equivalent to a lack of transcendence in the social realm, and this is a point

where Kant and Schiller differ.²⁶ Contrary to Immanuel Kant's defense of the complete independence of the aesthetic judgment, Friedrich Schiller, in his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1801), tries to establish a "social function of the aesthetic."²⁷ This function consists in restoring the unity of the senses, fragmented by the criteria of rationality, instrumentality, and profit maximization that have come to predominate in everyday life. Art can effect this restoration by virtue of its separation from everyday life. As Bürger summarizes, "It is Schiller's idea that precisely because it [art] renounces all intervention in reality, art is suited to restore man's wholeness."²⁸ Art's divorce from reality is for Schiller a historical category, not an essential one, and therefore the possibility of a future integration of art and reality is not foreclosed. Because of its separation from life, art remains, for Schiller, the only repository of values—happiness, good, truth, harmony—that remain unrealizable in society. Here lies "the moment of truth" in the autonomy of the aesthetic: a moment that maintains alive the memory of a happiness and integrity permanently exiled from present social conditions. This memory of "goodness" can operate as a critical force by contrasting the limitations of the present with the ideals expressed in art.²⁹

The notion of aesthetic autonomy also contains—and here Bürger follows Herbert Marcuse's analysis in "The Affirmative Character of Culture"—a moment of "untruth."³⁰ This "ideological" moment lies in interpreting autonomy—a historical condition—as an essential characteristic of art. In Bürger's terms, "the category of autonomy does not permit the understanding of its referent as one that develops historically. The relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society becomes

thus transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent of society."³¹ This ideological moment blunts the critical edge contained in art as bearer of social ideals. In Marcuse's words: "What counts as utopia, phantasy, and rebellion in the world of fact is allowed in the world of art." Artistic productions may then act as safety valves through which radical and rebellious impulses are expressed precisely because they have no consequences in the world of practice: "What occurs in art occurs with no obligation."³² And from this perspective, all artistic products are ultimately affirmative of the status quo. This is the ideological dead end that threatens the restorative and critical functions of art formulated by Schiller. The autonomy of the aesthetic, concomitant with its institutionalization, is then an intractable quality which gives rise to aporias that are only solvable by symbolically erasing either the social matrix of art (as did modernism) or the art institution itself (as did the avant-garde). Before we turn to examining each of these solutions, we should consider in passing some historical conditions that contributed to the separation of bourgeois art into a realm of action that could be conceptualized as autonomous from other social and political areas of experience.

The affirmative ideology of autonomous art did not become immediately apparent upon art's institutionalization. Both Bürger and Greenberg—and as we shall see a number of other critics—agree on the fact that for a number of decades bourgeois society and its artistic institutions appeared transparent to each other. T. J. Clark describes this period as ". . . a time, before the avant-garde, when the bourgeoisie, like any other normal ruling class, possessed a culture and an art which were directly and recognizably its own." He

lists the following examples as illustrations: Hogarth, Char-
din, Constable, Géricault, Richardson, Defoe, and Balzac.
"The bourgeoisie, we can say, in some strong sense *possessed*
this art: the art enacted, clarified, and criticized the class's
experiences, its appearance and values; it responded to its
demands and assumptions."³³ Independently of its dubious
existence, this prelapsarian time "before the avant-garde"
has a rhetorical function, as it allows critics such as Green-
berg and Bürger to postulate a "historical ground" from
which avant-garde culture could emerge. Simultaneously, it
operates almost as a utopian memory, and in that respect, a
repository of progressive social ideals: it purveys the image
of an epoch when the positive values of the enlightenment
had not yet been mortgaged to domination and limitless ex-
ploitation; when modernity wielded its promise against the
oppressiveness of the Old Regime; when culture and society
appeared "organically" connected.³⁴

The period of harmony seems to end with the Second
Empire in France. Throughout the Second Empire, spanning
from Louis Napoleon's *coup* in 1848 to the outburst of the
Commune in 1871, a rift developed between bourgeois of-
ficial culture and values and a particular sector of the arts.
The beginning of this period witnessed the rise of Gustave
Courbet, whom Greenberg considers the first full-fledged
avant-garde artist,³⁵ and of aestheticism, which marked,
according to Bürger, the consolidation of art as an autono-
mous institution.³⁶ American art critic Meyer Schapiro, a
contemporary of Greenberg, also concurred in the exist-
ence of a mutual estrangement between art and bourgeois
society beginning around these years.³⁷ In two pieces writ-
ten shortly before Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch,"
Schapiro links art's alienation and radicalization of style to

the self-liquidation of bourgeois political culture that took place after Louis Napoleon's *coup*. When postulating this breach in the relations between bourgeois society and its art, Schapiro, Greenberg, and Bürger leaned on the interpretation of historians and commentators who saw the Second Empire as the bourgeoisie's jettisoning of traditional forms of political culture in order to ensure social control. Karl Marx, witness to these developments, was one of the observers for whom "[t]he defeat of the June insurgents . . . revealed that here *bourgeois republic* signifies the unlimited despotism of one class over the other classes."³⁸ In these circumstances, the ideals of bourgeois democracy gave way to a reign of absolutism often aided by terror, with politics becoming a simulacrum which betrayed in actuality the intended openness of the public sphere while trying to preserve its appearance: "Society is saved just as often as the circle of its rules contracts, as a more exclusive interest is maintained against a wider one."³⁹

The subordination of politics to the "exclusive interests" of a class provoked a separation between private and public realms. Politics became progressively divorced from the real-life contexts of citizens, whose private needs, desires, and claims appeared increasingly estranged from a public sphere controlled by specific class interests. The almost total lack of communication between public and private realms constituted a decisive modification in the bourgeois public sphere, whose classical version was described by Jürgen Habermas in his study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.⁴⁰ Habermas points out that while the bourgeois public sphere had always been based on a difference between public and private, difference, however, did not entail a complete divorce between the two, but a sort of articulation:

The bourgeois public sphere could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated "intellectual newspapers" for use against the public authority itself. In those newspapers and in moralistic and critical journals, they debated that public authority on the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatized yet publicly relevant sphere of labor and commodity exchange.⁴¹

This sense of articulation between public and private is replaced, after the 1848 revolution, by a widening gap, not unlike the one opening between the bourgeoisie and its artists. The unhinging of public and private realms deflated the social and communal aspects of bourgeois existence while intensifying its private traits. Such developments had in turn important consequences for the production and reception of works of art.

The gap opened between public and private experience may have fostered a sense of estrangement from official life among artists. As Thomas Crow writes: "The avant-garde [meaning, in this context, the art of the followers of Louis David: avant-garde because of its anti-traditional form and politically radical content]⁴² leaves behind the older concerns of official art not out of any special rebelliousness on the part of its members, but because their political representatives had jettisoned as dangerous and obstructive the institutions and ideals for which official art was metaphorically to stand."⁴³ Cut off from social engagement and public concern, art becomes increasingly privatized. Aestheticism and the *art pour l'art* movements result from the privatization of aesthetic experience. Hence Greenberg writes: "'Art for art's sake' and 'pure poetry' appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a

plague."⁴⁴ For Bürger, "[a]s long as art interprets reality or provides a satisfaction of residual needs only in the imagination, it is, though detached from the praxis of life, still related to it. It is only in aestheticism that the tie to society still existent up to this moment is severed."⁴⁵ In addition to these two critics, Walter Benjamin also understood the emergence of *l'art pour l'art* as a result of the bourgeoisie's seizure "of its own cause from the hands of the writers and the poets": "At the end of this development may be found Mallarmé and the cause of the *poésie pure*. There the cause of his own class has been so far removed from the poet that the problem of a literature without an object becomes the center of discussion."⁴⁶

Aestheticism and art for art's sake made opaque the institution of art and its affirmative ideology by exacerbating the separation between art and life, and by accentuating the lack of consequence of art's artificial paradises. These characteristics make it an early manifestation of modernism, which, following on the tracks of aestheticism, resolved the opposition between the values of the bourgeoisie and those of art by positing aesthetic autonomy as the only realm of transcendence. Such a solution explains modernism's moderate anti-traditionalism: defending the autonomy of art still means accepting art's traditional social place, no matter how critically.⁴⁷

By contrast, the avant-garde defined itself in direct opposition to art's autonomy, to its existence as an institution separate from daily life and practice. In so doing avant-gardists attacked the separation of art from life and the affirmative character that such separation granted cultural products. They resolved the contradiction between the values of mainstream society and those of art by integrating